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Building Bridges Between Archives and Indian Communities

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Building Bridges Between Archives and Indian Communities

Abstract

The APS has a long, distinguished history of preserving Native American languages. It began when Thomas Jefferson was the President of the Society in the late eighteenth century. A new chapter in this history was written this past May at the “Building Bridges between Archives and Indian Communities” conference—the first time in more than two hundred years that a large number of Native Americans have been invited to the Library to reconnect with their heritage. It was my great privilege to organize the conference. As Larry Aitken, tribal historian from the Leech Lake band of Ojibwe, who performed the Sacred Pipe ceremony that began the conference, said, “It is good that the APS invited us here, opened their doors and their books so that we can bring these things back to life.”

Disciplines

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That the APS Library is a dynamic and productive place is demonstrated in our five articles by staff members. These reports describe outreach to Native American communities whose ethnohistorical and linguistic materials we hold; show how we hope to inspire youngsters with our efforts in conservation; feature new technologies that help us to be good stewards of our collections and provide more effective public service; illustrate the thoughtful development and preparation of our manuscript collections; and remind us that many staff are scholars in their own right. These vignettes hint at a greater, pervasive Library culture that reflects the Society's best traditions. *Martin L. Levitt, Librarian*

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN ARCHIVES AND INDIAN COMMUNITIES

The APS has a long, distinguished history of preserving Native American languages. It began when Thomas Jefferson was the President of the Society in the late eighteenth century. A new chapter in this history was written this past May at the “Building Bridges between Archives and Indian Communities” conference—the first time in more than two hundred years that a large number of Native Americans have been invited to the Library to reconnect with their heritage. It was my great privilege to organize the conference. As Larry Aitken, tribal historian from the Leech Lake band of Ojibwe, who performed the Sacred Pipe ceremony that began the conference, said, “It is good that the APS invited us here, opened their doors and their books so that we can bring these things back to life.”

The conference was sponsored by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which allowed the APS to digitize more than a thousand hours of recordings of endangered Native American languages. In conjunction with a recent grant from the Getty Foundation to survey Native American images, the Mellon grant represents an exciting opportunity to reinterpret Jefferson's vision of preserving indigenous languages for the digital age.

Representatives from ten tribes, along with a distinguished array of scholars and representatives from some of the nation's leading archives, discussed the development of new digital tools, cultural sensitivities protocols, and the historic value of the APS's world-class collection of Native American materials. The conference exemplified the mutually beneficial nature of these partnerships. Native

American historic preservation officers provided valuable information about language recordings that had never before been identified and, in turn, the APS generously provided linguists with recordings that will be returned to the community to strengthen language preservation and cultural revitalization.



Will West Long, a distinguished elder of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians (EBCI), holds aloft an eagle wand, 1951. American Philosophical Society. Two members of the EBCI attended the conference, one of whom, T. J. Holland, is a direct descendant of Long's.

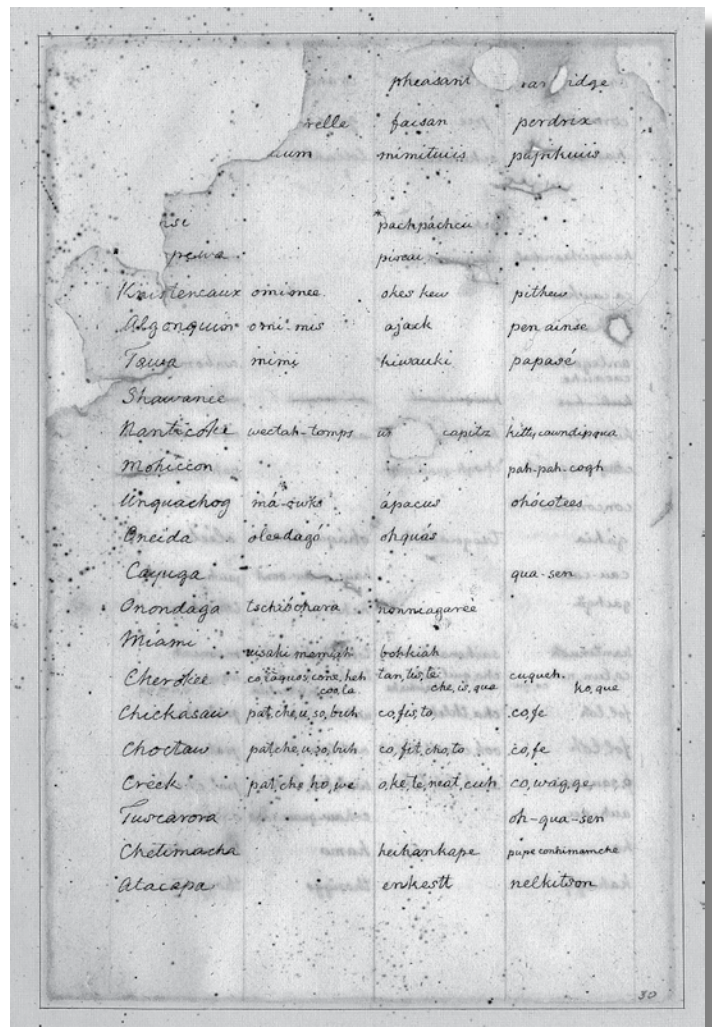
“Wouldn’t it be a wonderful thing,” Cherokee elder Tom Belt asked, “for these institutions to help out with the revitalization of traditional thought?” After listening to a recording of a Cherokee speaker made by anthropologist Frank Speck in the 1930s, Mr. Belt explained that it may seem that the “recording [is] disconnected from the actual person, not only by time but by death itself.” And yet, “in our way of looking at it,” institutions like the APS do much more than simply “house data. . . . They now begin to house the very kinetic energy capable of bringing the dead back to life. . . . We know that [these recordings] come from a different time, like finding a pair of buckled shoes that we will never wear again. In a way, to use a metaphor, Ben Franklin’s shoes become very, very important to us. Because they will teach us how to walk and will teach us what is important, maybe, about the whole idea of walking.”

The conference was dedicated to Daythal Kendall, the original director of the Mellon grant, who tragically passed away before the project could be completed. As I told Daythal’s beloved wife, Carolyn, “We think of Daythal every day and are confident his spirit is here with us.” Carolyn attended the conference and graciously gave the chief of the Eastern Shawnee Nation, Glenna Wallace, a tour of New Jersey—a gesture that characterizes the kindness and respect shown by the entire APS community to the Native American guests and to the scholars who attended this historic event.

As Chief Wallace observed in her closing remarks, “We were told that the Shawnee language would be extinct within ten years if something did not intervene. So as we gather today we have common goals to preserve our language and we are here seeking to preserve, seeking to partner, and it is the moment to begin.”

Timothy B. Powell

Director of Special Native American Projects



(Top) Tim Powell holds the microphone for Watie Akins, an elder of the Penobscot Nation, who sang a traditional welcome song to begin the conference. (Bottom) comparative vocabulary of Native American languages compiled by Thomas Jefferson. American Philosophical Society. It was the only item to survive the loss of Jefferson’s linguistic material after it was stolen and dumped in the James River. The list was salvaged from the banks of the river, hence its damaged state.